

THE HUSTLE



Part 1: The Game
Sire Rickenbach

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Chapter 1: The Game

Vince Barella sat in the folding chair just inside his garage and watched Megan Calloway bend over to pick up a package from her front step.

The shorts she had on should have been illegal. Grey cotton, rolled at the waist, tight enough to show the crease where her ass met her thighs. She bent for the box and the tank top—white, thin, no bra—fell away from her chest and he saw them. Both of them. Hanging free inside the cotton, heavy and round, swaying with the motion of her reaching, the nipples pink and stiff through the gap in the fabric for two full seconds before she straightened and they settled back against her body with a bounce that made his cock twitch against his thigh. The cotton caught on the hard points of her nipples and clung. He could see everything through that shirt—the full round weight of each tit, the way they sat high and firm on her frame even unsupported, the puffy raised nubs pressing through the white fabric, swollen and shameless. Tits like that on a body like hers, three doors from his garage, every goddamn morning.

She tucked the box under one arm and her dark hair swung against her shoulders and the tank top rode up on one side, and there it was: a strip of pale stomach, the hip bone, the waistband of whatever she was wearing underneath. She turned and walked back across the dead lawn, and those tits bounced with every step—heavy, shifting under thin cotton that hid nothing—and he watched every one.

The light caught her face when she reached the door. Dark hair. Pale blue eyes. That contrast—it hit him low in the gut every time, the same sick pull that never dulled. She didn't belong on this street. She didn't belong anywhere Vince had ever been.

The face was the hook. The tits were what kept him in this chair. He'd seen tits. He'd paid for tits. He'd never seen a pair like Megan Calloway's—the size, the shape, the way they held firm without a wire or a strap, the stiff pink points that showed through anything she wore. They turned every shirt she owned into pornography. He'd scraped the folding chair to this exact angle two weeks ago so the sightline was clean when she came out her front door. Hadn't moved it since.

Vince had been watching her since she moved in six months ago. Not casually. He knew her schedule. Monday through Friday she left at eight-fifteen, sometimes eight-twenty. Tuesdays and Thursdays she ran—sports bra, running shorts, hair in a ponytail, those tits bouncing with every stride in a way that made him grip whatever he was holding. She ran past his house and he sat right here or stood in the driveway next to the rusted Dodge Ram he'd scraped together enough to buy after county, and she didn't look at him. Chin up. Eyes forward. That straight-backed stride that said *I know you're staring and you're nothing to me*.

He'd jerked off thinking about her more times than he could count. In the shower, on the couch, twice in this exact chair after she jogged past in a sports bra soaked through with sweat and plastered to her skin. He'd thought about the weight of her in his hands.

The sounds she'd make—whether they'd be the quiet, controlled sounds the rest of her suggested, or something else entirely. He'd thought about her on her knees in his basement looking up at him with those pale eyes, and the thought alone was enough to finish him.

There was no woman like her on this block. There was no woman like her in this zip code.

He lit a Marlboro Red and flicked the Zippo shut and watched her disappear inside her half of the duplex.

Six months ago, she'd called the cops on him.

A Tuesday night. Bass through the shared walls of the duplex row, his dead father's sound system cranked past midnight because his buddy Ray was over and Ray brought a bottle and the bottle said turn it up. She'd dialed the non-emergency line at 1:07 AM. Spoke to the responding officer for maybe thirty seconds. Pointed at his house. Went back to bed. By Thursday she'd forgotten about it entirely.

Vince was on parole.

The officers ran a compliance check—standard procedure when they're already at a parolee's residence. Found the Remington 870 in the bedroom closet. His dead father's shotgun, unfired in six years, wrapped in an oil cloth behind the winter coats. Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. He was in handcuffs before she turned off her bedroom light.

Ninety days in county. He did them on the fourth floor of Middlesex Correctional with the fluorescent lights that never went off and the toilet two feet from his cot. His truck—the '04 Silverado he'd had for eleven years—repo'd from the driveway while he was inside. He came back thinner by fifteen pounds and walked the mile and a half from the bus stop because he didn't have a vehicle anymore.

She waved at him from the mailbox his first day back. Smiled. The little neighborly wave of a woman who barely knew his name. She didn't remember. She genuinely, honestly did not remember making the call. It was nothing to her. Thirty seconds on the phone. A noise complaint. Background noise of a Tuesday she'd already forgotten.

He remembered everything. The cell. The strip search. The lights. The sound of the door engaging. The manila envelope with his wallet, keys, lighter. Ninety days for a shotgun he'd never loaded, in a closet he never opened, because a woman who looked like a magazine cover pointed at his house and went back to sleep.

He wanted her. He'd wanted her since the day she moved in—a raw, greasy wanting that lived in his hands and his cock and the back of his throat. But the wanting had changed after county. Now it came with something underneath, something cold and patient. She'd taken ninety days from him. The wanting and the debt had grown together until he couldn't feel where one ended and the other began.

He had a plan.

He'd been reading the Calloways' financial trouble from across the street all spring. Didn't need a forensic accountant. They cancelled the lawn service in March. Her car

wore a boot for three days in April and she'd walked to the grocery store with a backpack on her shoulders. The Amazon deliveries—daily when she moved in—dried up to nothing by May. Her husband, Tyler, had been driving to a job site in a truck he clearly couldn't make the payments on, leaving before seven. Vince recognized the type—young guy whose jaw still clenched when he pulled into this neighborhood.

He was going to pitch Tyler the poker game this week.

Vince looked across the street. The porch light glowed yellow. Through the front window, the bluish wash of a laptop screen—Tyler, probably, staring at a bank balance that would make the pitch for him.

He pulled out his phone and called Dale.

Two rings. The voice came through low and heavy, like something settling. "Talk."

"Friday," Vince said. "I'm pitching the husband this week. You and Wicks come to the game, lose some hands, let him stack chips. He goes home thinking he's a genius."

"And the wife pours drinks."

"She pours drinks. She looks like she looks. He thinks she's the distraction that makes you idiots play stupid. The whole thing's framed as their hustle." Vince took a drag. Exhaled. "She's not running the hustle, Dale. She *is* the hustle. You and Wicks are paying me for the seat. The cards don't mean shit."

Silence on the line. Then: "The husband's in the room."

"Sitting right there. Three feet away. And here's the thing—he doesn't know you know. Far as he can tell, you've never seen either of them before. She's just some girl I brought in. He's just some guy who plays cards."

"But we know he's the husband."

"You know he's the husband. And you don't say a word about it. You look at his wife, you touch his wife, you tell her exactly what you're thinking when you look at her—and he sits there and takes it. Because if he acts like a husband, the cover's blown and the money stops. He'll police himself."

Dale was quiet for a beat. When he spoke, the voice was lower, and there was something in it—a thick, private satisfaction. "The husband won't even know we know."

"Not a clue. He'll think you're just some old guy who can't keep his hands off the bartender. Meanwhile you're grabbing his wife's ass while he watches and pretends he doesn't care."

The sound Dale made was barely a laugh. More like a growl that found something funny. "How much."

Vince told him. Dale didn't negotiate—he'd seen the photos Vince had taken from this chair with the zoom lens, her in the sports bra, her bending for the mail, and he'd looked at them for a long time without speaking before those same two words. Dale would pay whatever Vince told him.

"Friday," Dale said. "I'll have the cash."

Vince hung up. Set the phone on the arm of the chair. Took a drag and watched the smoke dissolve toward the dead lawn.

He could be patient. He'd waited ninety days behind a locked door. He could wait three more.

The gas station on Route 9 smelled like diesel and hot asphalt and the particular sweetness of a leaking soft-serve machine inside the convenience store.

Tyler was filling the truck—hand on the nozzle, watching the numbers climb—when he heard the Zippo. Click. The flick of the wheel, the small flame catching.

He looked up.

Vince Barella. The neighbor three doors down, opposite side. Tyler recognized him the way you recognized a dog that didn't look friendly—something you noted, avoided, kept noting. He'd seen him from the truck a dozen times: tanned and stocky, gold chain at his collar, sitting in the open garage or leaning against the driveway watching the block with a flat, idle patience, like someone with nowhere better to be. Tyler had never exchanged more than a nod. The dead lawn, the oil-stained driveway, the rusted weight bench visible in the garage—he'd clocked the house his first week and steered Megan to the other side of the street without explaining why.

Up close the seediness sharpened. Shorter than Tyler expected—five-ten at most. Thick through the shoulders and chest, gone soft in the middle. The tan was deep and permanent, creased into his skin like it had been baked there over decades. Dark eyes sat deep under heavy brows and the stubble on his jaw was shot through with grey. He wore a stained grey t-shirt and work pants and the gold chain caught the afternoon light.

He smelled like cigarette smoke and something else—a musk, close and heavy, that occupied the space between them like a third person.

Tyler was polite—Tyler was always polite—but the assessment was already made. A man who ran schemes and leaned against things and smoked. Useful, probably. Limited, certainly.

“Hey—Tyler, right?” Vince squinted through the smoke. “Three doors down?”

“Yeah.” Tyler pulled the nozzle free and hung it up. “Vince?”

Vince didn't extend his hand. He just stayed where he was, planted, the smoke curling between them. “Listen, don't take this the wrong way, but you look like a guy who could use a good night.”

Tyler waited.

“I run a card game. Friday nights, my place. Some guys I know—older guys, got money, can't play for shit. You any good at cards?”

“I've played.”

“You've played.” Vince grinned. Chipped incisor, yellow teeth. “That's what good players always say. ‘I've played.’ You're an engineer, right? Smart guy. Numbers guy.”

Tyler didn't ask how he knew that. Small street.

“What kind of stakes?”

“Enough to matter. These guys show up with cash—eight hundred, thousand, twelve hundred a night floating around the table. They play loose, they drink heavy, they think they’re good.” He took a drag. “They’re not good. You sit down with these guys for three hours, you’d walk out with a grand easy. More if you’re patient.”

Tyler could already see it—the room, the marks, the money on the table. He was good at cards and better at reading people who thought they were good at cards.

A thousand dollars a night. Two nights and the Visa minimum was covered. Four months and they were caught up.

But the part of Tyler’s brain that had run project budgets and managed subcontractors who lied about timelines—that part was already asking the question.

“Why me?”

Vince’s expression didn’t change. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve got a card game full of guys who hand you money every Friday. Why cut somebody else in? If they’re that easy, play them yourself.”

Vince took a drag. Held it. The smoke came out slow. “I had a guy. Eddie. Played with me for about a year—good player, sharp, kept the table honest. Moved to Bridgeport last month. His wife got a job or something.” He shrugged. “I need somebody in the chair who can actually play. Otherwise these guys get bored, stop coming, and the game dries up. You can’t fleece guys who don’t show up.”

It was an answer. It was a reasonable answer. Tyler turned it over and couldn’t find the seam, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that a man like Vince—a man who leaned against things and watched and smoked—didn’t do favors without a cut that ran deeper than twenty percent.

“I’ll think about it,” Tyler said.

Vince nodded. “You do that.” He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. As he turned to walk back to his truck—a rusted Dodge Ram that looked like it had been parked in a field for a decade before being pressed back into service—Tyler noticed a detail.

A tattoo on Vince’s right hand, across the knuckles, faded to near-illegibility. Old ink. Prison ink, maybe. And the way Vince’s eyes went flat for half a second when a siren wailed past on Route 9, the sound distant and fading, and then came back like nothing had happened.

Tyler clocked it. The tattoo. The flinch. The pitch that was almost too clean. He put the objections where he put the debt notice and the cancelled gym membership — in the back of a drawer he’d open when he had to.

He drove home thinking it might work, and thinking he’d need to hear more before he believed it.

Two days passed. Tyler sat at the kitchen table with his coffee and his laptop open. \$411.23 in checking.

He'd been staring at it for three minutes—not panicking, just working the problem. There was always a way through. He was good at this. He just had to find it.

He heard the bedroom door and closed the laptop. Slid the consolidated debt notice deeper into his desk drawer with one finger, casual. Megan didn't need to see it yet. He'd have the answer before she had the question.

Six months ago they'd been in a two-bedroom in Cedar Heights—good light, a parking garage, a lease they signed without checking the balance. Then Aldric & Partners lost a contract, the layoffs came in rounds, and Tyler's name was on the second one. Three months from vesting. The engineering salary that covered the rent, the furniture, the future—gone in a five-minute call from HR. He'd picked up electrical work through a temp agency within a month. Half the pay. Twice the hours on his feet. They'd moved here because the rent was nine hundred a month and the savings wouldn't survive another month at eighteen hundred.

The duplex was small and clean—Megan's doing. She'd made the place livable inside even if the outside was a lost cause. Their old apartment furniture—bought for rooms twice this size—looked oversized and wrong here, the dining table shoved into a corner that didn't quite fit it, framed wedding photos on walls that made the whole thing feel borrowed. The espresso machine from their registry sat on the counter, chrome and European, wildly out of place next to the Mr. Coffee they'd bought at Target the first week. The place was fine. The place was also the exact opposite of where they were supposed to be by now. Tyler saw the gap as temporary. He was sure of this the way he was sure of tensile strength ratings and rebar spacing—it was a fact, not a hope.

Megan came out of the bedroom in one of his old college t-shirts, her hair piled in a messy knot on top of her head. No bra. The shirt hung to mid-thigh and her legs were bare and long beneath it, and when she walked to the coffee maker the cotton moved with her and he could see the shape of her breasts shifting with each step—the weight of them, the way they swayed under the thin fabric. She reached for a mug on the top shelf and the shirt rode up over one hip and his stomach did the thing it had been doing for eight years.

The same hit. Never less.

She didn't notice because she never noticed. This wasn't a performance. This was a Tuesday. The morning light from the kitchen window caught the freckles across her nose and the faint scatter across her upper chest where the t-shirt collar hung loose—pale, barely there, the kind you only saw this close, this early, in this light.

“We're out of half and half,” she said, her back still to him. She opened the fridge and stared into it like it might produce some.

“There's oat milk.”

“Tyler.” She turned around. The look she gave him could have curdled the oat milk. “Don't.”

“It's not bad.”

“It's despair in a carton.”

He grinned. She fought the smile and lost, and when she smiled the whole room got warmer.

She poured black coffee and sat across from him and pulled one knee up to her chest and wrapped both hands around the mug. The t-shirt stretched across her breasts. She had no idea. He had every idea. This was his favorite part of every morning.

“What’s your day?” she asked.

“The Brenner house. Should be done by three if Bobby doesn’t rewire the panel backwards again.”

“Again?”

“He’s consistent.”

She laughed—the real one, the short bright sound that came from somewhere in her chest.

“What about you?” he asked.

“Freelance deck for the dental group. ‘Smiles That Inspire Confidence.’ I’ve been workshopping taglines in the shower.”

“Give me one.”

“‘Your Teeth Are Our Passion.’”

“Christ.”

“‘We Put The Fun In Fundamental Oral Hygiene.’”

“Stop.”

She grinned at him over the rim of her mug, pleased with herself, and for a second the duplex and the bank balance and the debt notice in the drawer didn’t exist. For a second it was just the two of them being the two of them, which was the one thing in Tyler’s life that still worked exactly the way it was supposed to.

He could smell her shampoo from across the table. She still used the expensive stuff—some French brand that came in a bottle the size of a flask and cost more per ounce than the wine they’d been drinking lately. She wouldn’t give it up.

The last luxury. Neither of them mentioned it. Every morning the scent of it filled their small kitchen and reminded him of the apartment they’d left, the life they’d left, the version of themselves that could afford shampoo without thinking about it.

They didn’t talk about money. They hadn’t in weeks. Megan checked the bank balance once a week; Tyler checked it daily and never mentioned the gap between what she saw and what he knew.

Tyler drove to work and the block unrolled through his windshield.

Chain-link fences. Yards with engine blocks on cinder blocks. The duplex next door with an above-ground pool that had been empty for two seasons, the liner sun-bleached and peeling. A pit bull tied to a tree in the yard across the street, asleep, its chain coiled in the dirt.

The Calloways’ side of their duplex was conspicuously cleaner—Megan had planted window boxes, swept the front step, put out a doormat that said “Hello” in

cursive.

It looked wrong.

He drove past Vince's house. The garage was open, the folding chair empty in the shadows, the ashtray full. The conversation at the gas station replayed—the pitch, the numbers, the easy confidence of a salesman closing on a sure thing. Tyler hadn't said yes yet. He'd said *I'll think about it*, which in his experience meant yes but on his terms.

He gripped the steering wheel. The truck was a 2021 F-150—bought when his salary was double what it was now, the monthly payment a small wound that bled every thirty days. He was keeping it. It was the last piece of evidence that his life had been bigger than this street, and selling it would mean admitting something he wasn't ready to admit. He pulled onto Route 9 and left Ridley Street behind and told himself, with complete certainty, that this was temporary.

Megan went for a run that afternoon. The route she did instead of the gym they'd quietly stopped paying for—three miles through the neighborhood, out to the elementary school and back, the kind of run you did to think rather than train.

She wore a sports bra and running shorts and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail that swung between her shoulder blades, and she was aware that she was impossible to ignore on a street like this.

It had always been this way. She'd grown breasts before any girl in her class—not gradually, not gently, but fast and full and impossible to hide, the kind that stretched her soccer jersey until her mother took her bra shopping with a face that was half sympathy and half resignation. By sixteen every boy in her high school knew her chest before they knew her name. By college she'd stopped counting the stares and started reading them—the quick downward flick, the half-second pause, the careful return to her face. She'd never gotten used to it. She'd gotten better at ignoring it.

Now, three miles into a Tuesday run, she was flushed and sweat-soaked and the sports bra was doing what sports bras did on a chest like hers: trying. The fabric was dark with sweat, plastered to her skin, and the sheer size of her tits strained the compression—pushed together, bouncing with each stride in a heavy rhythm she could feel in her shoulders. Sweat ran down the line between them and soaked the band and the wet fabric caught on her nipples, the shape of each one visible through the clinging material. Her stomach was flat and slick. Her legs were long and toned from years of this, the running shorts riding up with every stride. She smelled like clean sweat and warm skin and the shampoo she refused to stop buying, and the scent carried in the June air behind her like a signature.

Men in driveways paused what they were doing. A teenager on a porch stopped scrolling his phone and stared. She ran through their attention the way she'd been running through men's attention her entire adult life—chin up, eyes forward, back

straight, the posture of a woman who knew exactly what they were looking at and would not give them the satisfaction of caring.

Her route took her past Vince's house.

She felt his attention — a stillness from the open garage, a quality in the shadows that was different from the driveways she'd passed. Not casual. Not the reflexive, half-conscious stare of a man who happened to look up. This was focused. Patient. It had been waiting for her.

She didn't look.

Her chin lifted higher. Her spine went straight as a rod. She ran past without turning her head and felt his gaze on her back—between her shoulder blades, lower, where the running shorts ended and her legs began—until she rounded the corner and the feeling released.

On the way back, breathing hard, earbuds out, she slowed to a walk on her own block and saw that the neighbor across the street had put a couch on his lawn. Not being moved in or out. Just there—sagging, rain-stained, the cushions dark with mildew. Her mouth tightened. She looked at it and felt the weight of the distance between here and everywhere else she'd lived, and the weight was getting heavier by the month.

Her leather jacket hung by the door inside. She hadn't worn it since they moved. There was nowhere to wear it.

Tyler came home from the job site at five-thirty, and the smell of the work was still on him even after he'd changed shirts in the truck. Drywall dust. PVC solvent. The particular funk of a crawl space in June.

He showered before Megan could notice—scrubbed his hands until the new calluses stung, dressed in a clean t-shirt and jeans. Came out looking like a man who'd spent his day behind a desk instead of under one.

The crew knew he was overqualified. The foreman, a thick-necked guy named Gary who'd been pulling wire since before Tyler was born, called him "College." Not cruel. Almost affectionate, the way you'd name a golden retriever.

But the nickname landed on a bruise every time.

Tyler was college. He had the degree, the licenses, the trajectory. The fact that he was here—taping junctions and running Romex through residential studs—was a demotion he hadn't accepted and didn't plan to. He'd be back in an office inside a year. Two at the outside. This was filler. This was a story he'd tell at dinner parties in the house they were going to buy when he got back on his feet.

He didn't tell Megan what Gary called him.

They ate dinner at the kitchen table. Chicken thighs—the third meal she'd gotten out of a single pack from Shop Rite. Megan had figured out how to stretch cheap protein into something that tasted like intention instead of scarcity, and Tyler was quietly amazed by it even as the fact of it sat in his stomach like a stone.

She poured wine from a bottle that had cost six dollars and held up her glass and examined it with performative seriousness.

“This is a bold vintage, Tyler. Really aggressive on the nose.”

“Is that what that is? I thought the cap was leaking.”

“Thin. Aggressive. A finish that suggests the winemaker gave up halfway through.” She took a sip and her mouth tightened—the precise displeasure she’d learned in a house where wine came with corks. “We should send France a formal apology.”

He laughed. She almost didn’t—she held the straight face for a beat, pleased with her own delivery—then the corner of her mouth gave and they both laughed.

After dinner, Megan caught him staring at nothing. Not the blank gaze of a man spiraling—the focused, distant look of a man turning something over, examining it from angles. She touched his forearm across the table.

“Hey. Where’d you go?”

He came back. Smiled. “Nowhere. Just thinking.”

He was thinking about Friday. The thousand dollars. The table. He almost told her right then—the number was burning a hole—but he wanted it tighter first.

One more day.

Megan gathered the plates. He watched her scrape chicken bones into the trash and rinse the pan—fast, practiced, wringing every molecule of value from a six-dollar grocery run.

“What?” She’d caught him staring.

“Nothing. You’re just—” He shook his head. “You make this look easy.”

“I make everything look easy.” She said it without looking up, matter-of-fact, the way she said things that were true and she knew were true and saw no reason to be modest about. Then she glanced over her shoulder and her expression softened a fraction. “The towel’s on the hook. You’re not excused.”

He picked up the towel. She went back to the sink. He’d tell her tomorrow.

The follow-up came Wednesday evening. Tyler was at his truck in the driveway, unloading tools from the bed. Megan was inside—he could see her through the front window at the laptop, headphones on, working on the dental group’s marketing deck.

Vince appeared from the direction of his house, strolling along the sidewalk.

He wasn’t passing by.

“Hey. You think about it?”

Tyler set the tool bag down. “Yeah. I’m interested.” He wiped his hands on his jeans. “But I’ve got questions.”

Vince waited. Patient. The Zippo clicked open and shut in his left hand — a metronome.

“Your guy Eddie moved to Bridgeport. Fine. But you’ve been running this game a while, right? You know these guys, you know the table. Why do you need me at all? Why not just play them yourself and keep the whole pot?”

Vince's mouth moved — not quite a smile. More like the expression of a man who'd been expecting this and had already decided how far to let it run. "Because I'm the host. I run the game, I set the table, I bring the marks. I can't be the house and the shark. They'd catch on inside a month."

"So get another shark. You live on a street full of guys. Why the engineer three doors down?"

Vince looked at him. The click of the Zippo stopped. His eyes moved from Tyler to the house — to the window where Megan sat, her profile lit by the laptop screen, headphones on, one knee drawn up — and his gaze stayed there long enough that Tyler noticed.

"All right," Vince said. "I'll level with you. Eddie was good. Eddie won money. But the game was just a card game, you know? Guys showed up, played tight, went home. The pot topped out around six, seven hundred a night. That's the ceiling when it's just cards." He took a drag. "These guys play bad on their own. But they play *worse* when there's a woman in the room. Way worse. And your wife—"

He paused. Not for effect. It was a real pause, the kind a man makes when he's trying to describe something he's been thinking about for too long.

"I've seen her. Getting out of the car, getting the mail, on her runs. There's no women like that around here. Not in this zip code. She walks through that room, these guys won't be able to see their cards. She pours drinks, keeps 'em happy, you play tight, we split what you win. I take a cut for hosting. You walk away with the rest."

Tyler's throat tightened. The particular discomfort of hearing another man describe his wife — the runs, the mail, the car. Vince had been watching her. Of course he had. Everybody watched her. Tyler had been watching men watch Megan since the first frat party she'd walked into sophomore year.

But the discomfort was short, because the answer had done something the gas station pitch hadn't — it had made sense. Not just the logic of it, but the specific, slightly embarrassed way Vince had offered it, like a man admitting a weakness in his own plan. *The game needs a woman. Your wife is that woman. That's why I need you.* Tyler was the delivery mechanism for something Vince couldn't get on his own.

It was flattering, actually. Vince needed him because Megan was extraordinary, and Megan was his.

"She bartended through college," Tyler said. Neutral. Testing.

"Same thing, different room. She pours 'em doubles, they get sloppy, you clean up. Here's the play—" Vince leaned in, conspiratorial, man-to-man. "She mixes your drinks and mine without the booze. Keeps us sharp while the marks get hammered. She's not just eye candy, Tyler. She's the weapon."

The pitch was good. Tyler could see the whole thing now — the hustle framing, the team dynamic, the clean division of labor. Megan as an accelerant, making the marks dumber, which made Tyler's edge bigger. And the answer to the question that had been nagging him since the gas station was simple: Vince had come to him because his wife

was the most beautiful woman on this block, and probably in this zip code, and the game didn't work without her. That was the angle. That was the whole angle.

"What's the split?"

Vince laid it out. Hosting cut—twenty percent off the top, standard for running the game and providing the space and the marks. Tyler kept everything else. Tips for Megan were hers. The money would be cash. Friday nights, eight to midnight.

"And nobody touches her," Tyler said.

"They're gonna look. That's the whole point. But these guys are old, they're lonely, they wanna play cards and look at a pretty girl. Nobody's gonna do anything." Vince spread his hands. "I know these guys. They listen to me. You'll be right there."

Tyler believed it. He was the smart one. Vince was the facilitator. The men at the table were simple creatures with full wallets and empty heads. If anything went sideways, Tyler would see it coming—he managed complicated things for a living.

"I need to talk to Megan."

"Sure, sure. Take your time." Vince stepped back. The Zippo came out, the wheel flicked, the flame caught the Marlboro. "Friday's the next game. Just let me know."

He walked back toward his house. Tyler watched him go—the thick-shouldered amble, the smoke trailing, the gold chain catching the last of the evening light—and felt a small, unfamiliar thrill. This was going to work. He could feel it. He was going to sit down at a table with men who underestimated him and take their money while his beautiful wife poured their drinks and they never saw it coming.

These guys were idiots.

He picked up the tool bag and went inside.

He told Megan on Thursday night.

They were in the kitchen. She was at the counter slicing a lime for her water—a leftover habit from the life where they bought limes for cocktails instead of hydration—and he was leaning against the fridge with his arms crossed. Watching her. The way he always did when he had something to pitch: relaxed, confident, already halfway to the close.

"So Vince—the neighbor, three doors down—he runs this card game on Fridays."

Megan didn't look up. "The scary one?"

"He's not scary. He's just—" Tyler searched for the word. "Scruffy."

"He stares at me when I run."

"Everyone stares at you when you run."

"He does it from a lawn chair."

"Yeah, he's a little—look, he's rough around the edges. But he's got this poker game. Some older guys, friends of his. They've got money, they can't play cards, and they show up every Friday and lose a thousand bucks between them." He paused. "He wants me to play."

She looked up now. The lime knife paused. “You want to play poker at that man’s house.”

“I want to win poker at that man’s house. There’s a difference.” He smiled. She didn’t. “Meg. I’m good at cards. You know I’m good at cards. These guys are amateurs with cash—Vince basically said as much. I sit down for three hours, I walk out with a grand. Maybe more.”

“And?”

She knew there was an and. Eight years. She could read the sequence of his pitch the way he could read a blueprint.

“And he mentioned it would help if you came. Poured drinks. These guys play worse when there’s a woman in the room, apparently, and you’re—” He gestured vaguely at all of her. “You know.”

“I know what?”

“Don’t make me say it.”

“Say it.”

“You’re hott, Megan. You walk into a room and men forget how to count. You pour drinks, they stare, I take their money.”

His eyes dropped to her chest when he said it. He couldn’t help it—and the memory that followed was immediate. The farmer’s market last September. She’d thrown on a white t-shirt, no bra—hadn’t thought about it, had been lounging around the apartment all morning. Ten minutes in, Tyler noticed every man at the tomato stand had stopped pretending to shop. The guy behind the register was holding a bag and staring. The thin cotton hid nothing—the full shape of her tits visible, the raised profile of each puffy nipple pressing through the fabric—and the stand had gone quiet. Megan noticed at the same moment he did. Her face went scarlet. She crossed her arms so fast she nearly toppled a display of peaches and didn’t uncross them for the rest of the morning. She’d been silent in the car. She’d never left the house without a bra since. The mortification had been total—a woman who tucked in her shirts and crossed her ankles and did not, under any circumstances, put herself on display for strangers.

But Tyler remembered the silence at that tomato stand. He remembered what her body did to a room without even trying.

“So I’m the distraction.”

“You’re the weapon.”

She set the knife down. Crossed her arms—the default posture when she was thinking, which pushed her breasts up against the neckline of her shirt and Tyler’s eyes went there for a half-second and came back.

“Who are these guys?”

“Some older dudes. Friends of Vince’s.”

“What kind of friends?”

“The kind who show up on Friday nights with cash and too much cologne.”

“Tyler.”

“I’m not going to lie to you and say they’re accountants. They’re Vince’s guys. A little rough probably. But that’s the whole point—rough guys, bad at cards, easy money.”

“And I’m just there to pour drinks.”

“And look gorgeous. Which you can’t help. So really you just have to pour drinks.”

She almost smiled. He saw it—the corner of her mouth twitching, the effort of maintaining the skepticism against the flattery and the number and the pitch. She was competitive. She was broke. And she was married to a man who could sell ice to Eskimos when the cause was urgent enough.

“How much?” she said.

He told her the number.

Something moved across her face that she couldn’t control—a flicker of recognition. The Visa minimum. The electric bill. Three weeks’ worth of breathing room. He saw her see it. He recognized it because the same thing had happened to him at the gas station.

The number was its own pitch.

“Three nights,” he said. “We knock out the Visa, stack some breathing room, and we’re done. These guys will never know what hit them.”

“If one of them puts a hand on me, we’re leaving.”

“Obviously.”

“I’m serious, Tyler.”

“So am I. One hand out of line and we walk. I’ll be right there the whole time.”

She held his gaze. He held hers.

The kitchen was quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator. She picked up the lime knife.

“Fine. But I’m wearing what I want, I’m drinking their liquor, and if your scary neighbor friend calls me ‘sweetheart,’ I’m charging double.”

He grinned.

She fought the smile and lost again, and when it broke through it was the real one—the warm, conspiratorial smile of a woman who was about to do something stupid with the man she loved.

“We’re going to crush them.”

“We’re going to destroy them.”

She pointed the knife at him. “If any of them have a hot tub, I’m leaving.”

He crossed the kitchen and kissed her, one hand on her hip, and she leaned into it. They were in this together. Partners in a con they were running on men they’d never met, and the feeling of it—the team dynamic, the us-against-them—was the first clean, uncomplicated thing they’d shared in months.

Friday came and Megan stood in front of the closet.

She pulled out the fitted jeans—dark wash, from the old life, the ones that cost two hundred dollars and still fit like they’d been poured on. A top. Something appropriate. The white one from Nordstrom—fitted, clean neckline, thin fabric. She held it against herself in the mirror. It said *bar on a Saturday*, not *I dressed up for you*. Right.

She laid the jeans on the bed and stepped out of her sweatpants. Her legs were bare and long, the muscles from years of running visible in the warm light of the bedroom. She unhooked the stretched-out cotton bra she’d been wearing around the house and reached for the good one. White. Underwire. The one that took her breasts and organized them into something manageable—shape instead of spectacle. She put it on and felt the wire settle under each breast, the cups lifting and compressing, the band snug against her ribs. Her tits filled the cups to the edge—the top curve of each breast swelling above the lace trim, the kind of fit that a salesperson would call *supportive* and that every man who saw the result would call something else. She adjusted the straps. Checked the mirror. The bra did its job: contained, shaped, controlled.

She pulled on the jeans. The dark denim slid up her legs and caught at her thighs where it always caught—the shimmy she’d been doing since high school, working the fabric over her hips, tugging the waistband into place and buttoning. The jeans fit the way expensive jeans fit a body like hers: tight through the thigh and ass, sitting on her hips in a way that outlined everything underneath. She pulled the white top on over the bra. Smoothed it down. The neckline was modest. The fabric showed shape but no detail.

She looked at herself. A woman you’d notice. A woman you’d buy a drink for. Not a woman putting on a show.

She nodded at the mirror. Fine.

Tyler appeared in the bedroom doorway. She caught him in the mirror—his eyes moving from her legs to her waist to the place where the top met her chest.

“You look great,” he said. He leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed and his head tilted and the expression on his face was the one he wore when he was about to talk her into something. “But you look like you’re going to brunch.”

“I’m going to a card game at our neighbor’s house. Brunch would be an upgrade.”

“These guys are supposed to lose their minds, Meg. That’s the play. You walk in looking like you’re meeting your mother for lunch, they’re going to play normal poker.” He pushed off the doorframe and walked to the closet. She watched him in the mirror, one eyebrow raised. He reached past her work blouses and pulled out the denim shorts—the short ones, cutoff, frayed at the hem, the pair she wore to the beach and around the house on weekends and absolutely nowhere else. He held them up.

“No.”

“And this.” He reached to the shelf and pulled down a ribbed white tank top—thin, fitted, the kind that clung to everything it touched.

“Tyler. No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll look like I’m—” She stopped. Her mouth pressed into a thin line, the same line it pressed into when someone used the wrong fork or said something vulgar at a dinner party. “Those shorts barely cover anything.”

“That’s the point. These guys need to be distracted, not mildly interested. You wear this, they won’t be able to hold their cards.”

She looked at the shorts in his hand. The tank top. Then at her own reflection—the tasteful jeans, the Nordstrom top, the put-together woman who wouldn’t turn a single head in this outfit that she hadn’t already turned a thousand times.

Tyler’s confidence was irritating because it was contagious. He had the look he got when he was certain—the half-smile, the easy posture, the absolute sureness that he’d already figured out the room and everyone in it. He held out the shorts.

“Trust me. We walk out with double.”

She took the shorts from his hand.

She turned her back to him and stripped off the jeans—the denim peeling down her legs, stepping out one foot at a time. She stood in the bra and her underwear, bare legs, and pulled on the shorts. They were soft from a hundred washes and short enough that the pocket lining would peek below the hem if she moved wrong. She buttoned them. The frayed edge sat high on her thighs—four inches above the knee at least, the pale skin of her upper legs bare, the curve of her ass visible at the hem when she shifted her weight. The denim was tight. It hugged her hips and her ass in a way that the dark-wash jeans had only hinted at.

She pulled off the Nordstrom top and dropped it on the bed. Picked up the ribbed tank. Pulled it on over her head and felt it slide down her body and catch on every contour—the bra, the shape of each breast inside it, the dip of her waist, the flat plane of her stomach. The ribbed cotton was thin and the white was bright and the bra underneath was visible through the fabric—the outline of the cups, the faint shadow of the straps at her shoulders. The tank ended just above the waistband of the shorts. A strip of bare skin showed between the hem and the denim.

She looked at herself in the full-length mirror and her stomach turned over.

The woman looking back was not the woman who had been standing there two minutes ago. The shorts showed everything the jeans had hidden—the full length of her legs, the toned thighs, the way the frayed denim barely covered her ass and pulled tight across her hips. The tank was worse. The ribbed fabric clung to her bra and caught the shape of her breasts with a specificity that made *shape* an understatement—the full, round weight of each one visible through the cotton, the line where the underwire ended and the soft upper curve began, the faint shadow of her nipples through the double layer of fabric. Her waist looked narrow between the flare of her hips and the width of her chest. The strip of bare stomach between the tank and the shorts was flat and pale and drew the eye straight to the waistband sitting low on her hips.

She looked like a woman men would do stupid things for. She looked like a woman who was asking them to.

Her reflection stared back and she felt the old unease rise through her chest—the discomfort she'd carried since sixteen, since she'd first understood what her body did to rooms she walked into. She didn't dress like this. Not for strangers. Not for men she didn't know in a house she didn't trust. The woman in the mirror looked available, exposed, like she was advertising something she had no intention of selling.

She reached for the jeans.

"Meg." Tyler was behind her. His hands landed on her shoulders—warm, steady. He met her eyes in the mirror. "You look incredible. That's the whole play. They look at you and they can't think. Three hours and we're done."

"I look like I'm trying to get groped, Tyler."

"You look like a woman who's going to take a thousand dollars off a table full of idiots." He squeezed her shoulders. The confidence again—total, uncomplicated, the certainty of a man who believed he had already solved the room. "We need this."

The words sat between them. *We need this*. The Visa bill. The debt notice in the drawer she wasn't supposed to know about but did. The nine-hundred-dollar rent on a duplex that was the cheapest thing in the zip code. She looked at herself in the mirror. The tank top pulling across her chest. The shorts that were barely shorts. Her breasts, which had been drawing attention she didn't want since she was fourteen, doing exactly what they always did in a top like this.

She exhaled. Straightened her spine. Lifted her chin—the posture, the armor, the reflex she'd been putting on since she was old enough to understand that men were going to stare whether she asked them to or not.

"Fine." She smoothed the tank over her stomach. Turned sideways, checked the mirror, tugged the shorts down a quarter inch. "But if one of them calls me 'sweetheart,' I'm adding a surcharge."

Hair down. She pulled the elastic free and her dark hair fell past her shoulders—thick, heavy, the contrast of the nearly-black waves against the white tank and her pale skin sharp enough to stop a conversation. She ran her fingers through it, shook it out. Touched up her mascara. A light gloss on her lips—nothing that looked like effort. Perfume at her wrists and her neck—the good one, the French scent that cost more per ounce than the wine they'd been drinking, warm and floral and entirely wrong for where she was going. The shampoo underneath it. She smelled like clean hair and good decisions and a life she wasn't living anymore.

She looked at herself one last time. The shorts. The tank clinging to the bra, the shape of her tits visible through the ribbed cotton. The bare legs. The dark hair against the white fabric. The pale blue eyes that held her own gaze in the glass without flinching.

She could do this. She'd bartended worse rooms. She'd handled worse men. Three hours, and she'd be home and in the shower and these shorts would be in the hamper and she'd never wear them for anyone but Tyler again.

"Ready?" he asked from the doorway.

Her reflection didn't look ready. Her reflection looked like a woman walking into something she couldn't undo.

"No," she said. "Let's go."

They walked to Vince's house. Three doors down, opposite side of the street.

Ninety seconds of sidewalk and the longest transition of the evening.

The streetlights were just coming on. The block was settling into its Friday sounds—a television through a screen door, somebody's charcoal grill sending up smoke two houses down, the distant bass of a car stereo thumping from the cross street. The air was warm and smelled like cut grass and lighter fluid and the exhaust of a truck that had idled too long.

Tyler's hand found the small of her back as they walked. An unconscious gesture, the automatic proprietary touch that was their shorthand for *I'm here*. She felt his palm through the fabric of her top and the warmth of it steadied something in her chest.

She could feel the new calluses through the cotton.

Vince's house got closer and the details sharpened. The dead lawn. The oil stain on the driveway shaped like a dark continent. The open garage with its shadows and its mess.

The house was lit from inside—yellow light through curtained windows, figures already moving. Music, faint, something with a bass line. Cigarette smoke carrying from the direction of the porch.

She could feel it—the wrongness of the setting, the gap between who she was and where she was going. Her perfume against the charcoal smoke. Her hundred-dollar cutoffs and her ribbed tank on this sidewalk. The French shampoo and the six-dollar wine and the duplex with window boxes on a block where the nicest landscaping was an empty above-ground pool.

"This is going to be terrible," she said.

"It's going to be easy," he said. "I'm going to take these guys apart."

She almost smiled.

They reached the porch. Tyler squeezed her hand once, quickly, and then his hand dropped because they were here and the door was in front of them and the evening was about to begin.

Vince opened the door.

Megan stepped inside and the smell found her first—old cigarettes saturated into every surface, layered with fried food and something underneath both, something damp and biological that had stopped being fixable years ago. The smell of a house that had given up on itself.

Wood paneling on every wall, warped at the seams with humidity. Carpet that might have been beige twenty years ago and was now the color of a headache.

She saw the stain on the kitchen counter—brown, ring-shaped, wide as a dinner plate. She saw the paneling buckle near the floor where moisture had been winning a long war.

Her mouth tightened. She didn't wrinkle her nose. She wanted to.

Vince stood in the doorway. He wore a dark button-down that was open one button too many, revealing the gold chain resting against a thatch of dark chest hair. The slicked-back hair caught the overhead light with a greasy shine. The stubble. The deep-set eyes. He looked at her—face first, then down, slowly, to her chest, where his gaze settled for a full beat before continuing to her legs and back up—and the look wasn't subtle. He didn't pretend he wasn't doing it. The appraisal was patient, specific, proprietary, as if he was confirming something he already knew.

“Hey. Come in, come in.” His voice was lower than she'd expected, or maybe just closer. Direct, no preamble.

He shook Tyler's hand—a grip that looked firm and brief. He didn't shake Megan's. He put a hand on her upper arm, his rough fingers wrapping briefly around the muscle, too familiar for a first real interaction. The touch lasted a second. He let go and stepped aside and the smell of him—cigarettes, a musk that was close and heavy, something greasy that might have been hair product or cologne or just Vince—replaced the house smell for a moment before the house reclaimed the air.

The interior tour took thirty seconds. Living room: sagging couch, a recliner with duct tape on the arm, a TV on a stand that looked like it had been assembled wrong. Kitchen: the stained counter, a Mr. Coffee maker with a cracked carafe, a dog bowl by the back door but no dog. On the wall near the kitchen, a framed photograph of an older woman—heavysset, dark hair, the same deep-set eyes as Vince. His mother. The house had been hers.

The poker table stood in the center of the living room, the couch pushed against the wall to make space. Folding legs, green felt top, six mismatched chairs pulled around it. Chips in a plastic carousel. Cards still in the cellophane. Against the far wall, the bar setup: a card table with bottles—mid-shelf bourbon, gin, vodka, a handle of rum—a cooler full of ice from a gas station bag, a sleeve of red Solo cups.

Megan assessed the bar. She'd served worse in basements in college where the bottles were plastic and the ice was optional. At least these were glass. At least there was actual ice.

She was wrong here. Not wrong the way a misplaced object is wrong — wrong the way a living thing is wrong in a dead room. The straight spine, the ankles crossed where she stood, the chin that stayed level even as her eyes catalogued every stain and buckle and accumulated failure of the space. She held herself the way she always held herself — poised, composed, the unconscious inheritance of a woman who grew up where the furniture matched and adults spoke in complete sentences — and in Vince's living room that composure was an announcement. It broadcast in every direction at once: *I do not belong here*. The posture alone was enough. Add the face, the body, the

dark hair falling past her shoulders, and she wasn't just wrong for the room. She was an insult to it. A woman men would put on a pedestal, marooned in a room where the carpet couldn't remember its original color.

And the men would feel it. She could already see it forming — the way Vince's gaze had lingered, patient and proprietary, the way the room seemed to reorganize itself around her presence. A woman like her in a place like this wasn't just beautiful. She was a provocation.

Before the other men arrived, Vince settled into the best chair at the poker table—the one at the head with a clear sightline to the bar, to the door, to everywhere Megan would be standing for the next four hours. He sat the way men like him sat: spread, weight centered, as if the furniture existed to hold specifically him.

“Look,” he said. “These guys are gonna look. That’s the whole point, right? They look at her, they can’t think straight, you clean up.” He directed this at Tyler but his eyes slid to Megan and stayed. “If anything gets out of hand—anything—you give me a signal. You need a word. Something you can say out loud that doesn’t sound like a signal. Something the bartender would say.”

Megan thought for a second. “‘Last call.’”

Vince pointed at her. “That’s it. You say ‘last call,’ I shut it down. Wrap the game, clear the room, everybody goes home. They won’t even know it was you.” He looked at Tyler. “Either of you can say it. But it won’t come to that.”

Tyler nodded. Megan nodded.

He let that land. The room was quiet for a moment. Then the pivot, and his voice dropped half a step—still casual, but closer, man-to-man, the tone of a partner letting his crew in on the real play.

“But just... go with it a little. Whatever makes ’em feel good. You’ll know where the line is—that’s what the signal’s for.”

“Go with what, exactly?” Megan asked.

Vince met her eyes. The look was steady, unbothered. “The attention. The comments. These guys are gonna tell you you’re the best-looking woman they’ve ever seen, because you probably are, and they’re gonna be loud about it. Let ’em. It’s part of the play. The more they think they’ve got a chance, the worse they play. That’s the hustle.”

Megan said nothing. Tyler said nothing.

“One more thing.” Vince leaned forward, elbows on the felt. “Don’t let on that you two are together.”

Tyler frowned. “What?”

“These guys’ll play different if they think she’s somebody’s wife. They’ll hold back, get careful. We want ’em loose. So tonight, she’s just... Megan. She’s here because I asked her. You’re here because you play cards. You don’t know each other.”

“We walked here together,” Megan said. “From three houses down.”

“And they don’t know that.” Vince shrugged. “Easy.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said. But she was smiling—the edge of a laugh breaking through.

Tyler was looking at her hand. Her left hand, resting on the back of the chair. The ring.

“Meg.” He nodded at it.

She looked down. The band caught the overhead light—thin, white gold, the one he’d slid onto her finger three years ago in a garden with sixty people watching. She understood before he said it.

“Right.” She twisted it off. The metal slid easy—her fingers were warm—and her hand felt bare and wrong without it. She held it for a second, then slipped it into the front pocket of her shorts.

Vince watched them agree. His face showed nothing. His hand went to his slicked-back hair and ran through it once, and when it came away his palm had a shine.

The doorbell rang.

Wicks came through the door talking.

“Vince! Where’s this girl, man? Where’s the—oh.”

He stopped in the living room doorway.

He was smaller than Megan expected. Thin, wiry, vibrating with a restless energy that entered the room a full step before he did. Bad denim—jeans that sagged at the knee and a jacket he didn’t need in June. Sharp features, a jawline that might have been something twenty years and a thousand cigarettes ago. Bad teeth—yellowed, one chipped, the canine on the right side dark with decay.

Watery blue eyes that were already moving, scanning, unable to land on anything for more than a second until they landed on Megan and locked.

“Holy shit.” He said it to the room, not to her. His voice was nasal and too loud.

“Vince, you didn’t tell me she was *this* hot.”

No handshake. No *nice to meet you*. No small talk. She was the event. Wicks had declared it.

Dale entered behind him.

Dale came in behind him, and the doorway shrank.

He was an enormous black man. Six-two, two-fifty, broad across the chest and neck and shoulders — a body built by twenty years of hauling freight, never a gym, the mass distributed across a frame that made the room’s dimensions feel like a miscalculation. His skin was deep, rich dark — the unbroken black-brown of polished wood catching the overhead light. Close-cropped grey hair sat tight against his dark scalp. A heavy face: wide nose, full mouth, a jaw that carried hard bone beneath the softening of age. Heavy-lidded eyes that gave him the look of a man half-asleep, except he was watching everything. A gold chain — thicker than Vince’s, real — sat in the crease of a neck wider than Megan’s thigh.

He didn't rush. He moved through the room the way a man moves through a room that belongs to him regardless of whose name is on the deed. He set a bottle on the counter — whiskey, better than anything Vince had — and turned to look at Megan.

The look. He didn't comment. He didn't narrate. He looked at her chest — patient, direct, his dark eyes holding without blinking, without pretending it was anything else — then raised them to her face with the same certainty.

“Megan.” His voice was deep and chest-deep, a low rumble she felt in the floorboards. Not a question. Not a greeting, exactly. He said her name the way a man says the name of something he's been told about and is now confirming exists.

The weight of his attention was physical. She could feel it settle on her the way you feel a change in air pressure. She held his eye contact. She was the one who broke it — looked down at his hand on the whiskey bottle, the dark forearm thick with veins, old scars faded white against that deep skin. When she glanced back, something in his expression had settled. Satisfied. Confirmed.

He extended his hand. It engulfed hers — large, warm, dry, dark against her pale fingers — and his grip was certain. He held for a beat longer than necessary. Up close the smell of him was dense: cigar smoke, the stale residue of cheap cigars clinging to his clothes, his skin, his breath, layered with a warm cologne that was the only evidence any of these men had tried. The combination filled whatever space he occupied and pushed outward.

“Vince undersold you,” Dale said. The voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. “Considerably.”

Wicks shook her hand. Clammy, eager, too many small bones.

His fingers were stained yellow at the tips—nicotine that didn't wash out.

“Vince, where'd you find her?” Wicks was already talking to the room, not to her. “God damn. Look at her. Look at —” He gestured at all of Megan with both hands, a frantic up-and-down sweep. “Are you serious right now?”

“I'm standing right here,” Megan said. Cool. Level. The voice she used on contractors who tracked mud on her floor.

Wicks blinked. His grin faltered for half a second — the briefest recalibration of a man who'd forgotten the object of his monologue could hear him. “Oh — hey, no, I'm — that's a compliment. That's all that is.” He put both hands up, palms out, a mock surrender that didn't reach his eyes. “My bad. I just — you're gorgeous. That's all I'm saying.”

“Thank you.” Flat. The two words were a door closing.

Wicks looked at Dale for backup. Dale was already seated — he'd taken the chair at the far end without asking, the biggest seat, his mass settling into it the way water fills a container. He didn't help Wicks. He lit his cigar, the Zippo clicking open and shut, and watched Megan through the first curl of smoke.

“Sit down, Wicks,” Dale said. Low. Not a suggestion.

Wicks sat.

Vince, from the head of the table, smiled at Megan — the smile that was supposed to be reassuring. “Don’t mind him. He talks before he thinks. You good? Bourbon’s on the left.”

“I’m good.” She met his eyes and held them and her chin was level and her posture was perfect. She was not going to flinch for these men. Not for the skinny twitching one and not for the enormous one watching her through cigar smoke and not for Vince with his greasy patience.

But underneath the composure, a current ran. She had never been this close — this *available* — to men like this. Not in college behind a bar with bouncers at the door and forty other women in the room. Not passing them on a sidewalk with distance and daylight and somewhere else to be. Here there were no bouncers. No other women. No distance. Four men, one woman, a locked door behind her and an evening stretching ahead, and they were looking at her the way men look at something they believe they’ve been given access to. The hunger was visible. Wicks wore it like a billboard. Dale wore it like a uniform. Even Vince — casual, proprietary — wore it beneath the host’s smile.

She had poured drinks for men who wanted her a hundred times. She’d never poured them in a room where the wanting had no walls.

Tyler sat at the poker table. His jaw was set. He picked up a chip and turned it between his fingers. He was nobody to them — just some card player Vince had invited, unconnected to the woman behind the bar.

Megan stepped behind the bar table and picked up the bourbon. “What’s everyone drinking?”

She was working. She was the bartender. She could do this.

The game began and Tyler started winning.

He sat at the table with Dale to his left—massive, watchful, the cigar already lit and trailing smoke toward the stained ceiling tiles—and Wicks across from him, bouncing his leg and shuffling his cards wrong and providing a running commentary on every hand. Vince sat at the head, the position from which he could see everything: the table, the bar, and Megan moving between the two.

Megan ran the bar. She was good at this—the bartender muscle memory from college snapping back into place like it had never left. Heavy pours for Dale and Wicks. She watched the bourbon glug into the Solo cups and made the drinks strong enough to taste like a bad decision. For Tyler and Vince, she mixed cocktails that looked identical to the real thing but held nothing harder than ginger ale and a splash of bitters for color. She was keeping the marks drunk and the team sharp. She was part of the hustle.

And she was enjoying it. The first round she delivered to the table, she set Dale’s drink at his elbow with a smile that was pure bartender warmth—professional, calibrated, designed to loosen wallets—and watched him take a long swallow without

checking the pour. *Three shots in that cup and you don't even taste it, sweetheart.* She felt a flicker of satisfaction as sharp as a card turning over.

When Wicks started shuffling his cards wrong for the third consecutive hand, she leaned against the bar table and said, “You know those go face-down, right?” The table laughed. Even Dale’s mouth moved. Wicks clutched his chest in mock offense and Megan sipped her wine and felt, for the first time in months, like the most competent person in a room. These guys were exactly as dumb as Vince promised. She was smarter than all of them and they were paying for the privilege of her company and the irony was delicious.

Tyler played the first hand cautiously, reading the table. By the third hand, he knew. These guys were exactly what Vince had described—older men with cash, playing loose, making choices that no serious card player would make. Wicks folded too early on strong hands and bet too heavy on garbage. Dale pushed his chips in like money wasn’t the point. Vince lost a hand and shrugged like it was weather.

Tyler won the first three hands.

The winning locked into place. Three hands, three pots. Each one clean—reading Wicks’s nervous tells, catching Dale’s loose bets, folding when he knew to fold. Tyler stacked the chips and felt something he hadn’t felt in months. Not relief. Competence.

They were losing on purpose. Tyler didn’t see it. He saw what he expected to see—old guys, loose play, sloppy folds.

He won another hand. Stacked the chips—precise, satisfied.

Wicks tipped first. She brought his bourbon — three shots deep, the way she poured for marks — and when she set it on the felt, his hand came up and pressed a twenty into her palm. His fingers were clammy. They closed around hers and stayed. She could feel the dampness of his skin, the nicotine-stained tips, the small bones working against her knuckles as his thumb traced across her wrist.

“For you, gorgeous.” His voice was too loud, too close. “Best bartender I’ve ever had.”

She pulled her hand back. Pocketed the bill. Smiled the bartender smile.

Dale’s tip came two hands later. She was walking back to the bar, her back to the table, when she felt it — his hand. Not on her arm, not on her waist. On her ass. His fingers found the back pocket of her shorts and tucked a folded fifty into the denim, and his palm stayed. Flat. Deliberate. His hand was enormous — she could feel the span of it covering her entire back pocket, the heat of his palm through the thin fabric, his thick fingers pressing into the curve of her ass — flat, deliberate, certain it belonged there. The touch lasted two full seconds. Three. His thumb shifted, tracing the seam where denim met the crease of her thigh, and she felt the drag of each callus through the fabric.

Then the hand withdrew. Slow.

Megan’s step hitched. She kept walking. Her face was warm. She set the tray on the bar and her fingers gripped the edge of the card table and she stood there for a moment

with her back to the room, breathing. The phantom of his palm was still on her. The size of it. The certainty. She could feel exactly where each finger had been.

She glanced at Tyler. He was mid-hand, cards fanned, reading the table. He looked up. Their eyes met across the room and the contact carried weight — she was asking and he was answering and the answer was a small nod that cost him something he didn't itemize. *Play ball*. The tip was part of the hustle. The pat was part of the hustle. Everything was going to plan.

The comments started during the fourth hand.

Wicks couldn't help himself. The man was a faucet—thoughts entered his head and exited his mouth without passing through any filter, and three drinks in, the filter's absence was total. Wicks talked about Megan the way men talked about women when no husband was present. Freely. Explicitly. He'd been studying her body since he walked in and had no reason to censor the observations.

"Where'd Vince find you?" he asked her, leaning back in his chair, the grin showing every bad tooth he owned. His eyes were on her chest, not her face.

"I'm just here for the tips." She gave him the bartender smile—warm, professional, a wall dressed up as a window.

"Better question," Dale said, low, not looking up from his cards, "is can he keep you."

Wicks cackled. "Seriously, what's your deal? You got a boyfriend? You can't be single. No way a woman looking like that is single."

"I'm here to pour drinks, not answer questions." She set his refill on the table and stepped back.

"That's a non-answer," Wicks said. He looked at Dale. "That's a non-answer, right? She's deflecting. She's single." He turned back to Megan, delighted with his own deduction. "You're single."

She rolled her eyes and poured herself a glass of wine. For the nerves.

Wicks swiveled to Tyler. The watery eyes narrowed with genuine curiosity. "What about you, man? You haven't looked at her once. Not once. She's walking around here looking like *that* and you're over there counting chips like it's tax season."

Tyler shrugged. "I'm here to play cards."

"He's here to play cards." Wicks repeated it to the table the way you'd repeat something a psych patient said. "She's got the best tits I've ever seen in my life and he's *here to play cards*." He looked at Dale. "Is he gay? He's gotta be gay."

"I'm not gay, Wicks."

"Then what are you, blind? Or — wait." Wicks leaned forward, squinting. "How do you even know Vince? No offense, bro, but you don't exactly fit in here. You look like you sell insurance."

"He looks like a cop," Dale said. Low. Not looking up from his cards.

"I play cards," Tyler said. "Vince needed a player."

Wicks studied him for another second, then gave up—his attention span for anything that wasn't Megan's chest had a half-life of about three seconds. He turned back to the bar.

But the comments didn't stop. They escalated — not by leaps but by degrees, each one a half-step past the last, and without the governor of a husband's presence in the room, the escalation was faster and more explicit than anything Megan had fielded behind a bar.

Wicks, three hands later, while she bent to retrieve an empty from the floor near Dale's chair: "I can see her nipples through that tank, Dale. Both of 'em. The whole shape — they're poking right through the fabric. Jesus, Megan, do you know what you look like bent over like that?"

She straightened up fast. Her face was hot. She pressed her lips into a thin line — the reflexive expression of a woman whose mother taught her that some things simply aren't said in company — and carried the empty to the bar.

"Do you talk to every woman like that," she said, not turning around, "or just the ones you think can't leave?"

Wicks's grin faltered. "Hey — it's a compliment."

"It's not." She turned, wine glass in hand, her posture very straight. "Just so we're clear."

Silence. One second. Two.

Vince leaned forward at the table. "Wicks. Ease up." His voice was mild, almost bored — the tone of a man managing an employee. "You're gonna scare her off and then what are we looking at for the rest of the night? Your face?"

Wicks put his hands up. "I'm just saying —"

"Say less." Vince looked at Megan. The look was warm, conspiratorial — *you and me, these idiots*. "He can't help himself. Don't hold it against us."

"I'll try." She sipped her wine. The exchange had given her something: the illusion that Vince was the reasonable one. The adult in the room. She noted it without examining it.

But Wicks couldn't stay reined. Two hands later, his voice carrying across the room: "Vince, I swear to God, if she looked at me like that in a bar, I'd follow her home. I'm serious. I'd be outside her house."

"That's genuinely frightening," Megan said. "You understand that's a crime."

Dale laughed. A single deep sound, more felt than heard. "The man has no filter," he said, his heavy-lidded eyes on Megan. "You'll get used to it."

"I don't plan to get used to it."

"Mm." Dale's mouth moved — something close to a smile, or the memory of one. He looked at her over the fan of his cards. "Then I'll enjoy watching you not."

Wicks was not deterred. He was simply incapable of deterrence. Three drinks in, the monologue resumed—enthusiastic, oblivious, already forgetting the last five minutes had happened.

“I think about it, though.” He leaned back in his chair, grinning, watery eyes bright. “What she sounds like. I bet she tries to be quiet. Bites the pillow. But I also bet —” He looked directly at Megan, grin splitting his face. “I bet the right guy could make her loud. I bet she’d be so fucking loud the neighbors would know his name.”

Megan set her wine glass down. The sound was precise — glass on laminate, deliberate, final. Her jaw tightened and her eyes went cool and her voice dropped into the tone she used on men who overstepped.

“I think,” she said, “you should play your cards.”

The sentence was six words and it closed a door so firmly that even Wicks felt the temperature change. He looked at Dale. Dale was watching Megan—focused, still, something confirmed.

“I like her,” Dale said. To the room. To no one. The deep voice sat in the air like a weight on a scale.

The silence held for three seconds. Then Vince dealt the next hand and the game moved on, but the quality of the room had shifted. Megan poured her second glass of wine. Her hands were steady. Her pulse wasn’t.

And Tyler. Tyler sat at the poker table and heard every word. Every crude observation, every explicit thing Wicks said about his wife. He heard Dale’s low comment when she collected his empty — “You smell good” — three words that carried more weight than anything Wicks had said all night. He watched Megan’s face go warm. Watched her say “Thanks” without lingering. Felt something in his jaw he couldn’t unlock.

He couldn’t react. He didn’t know her. She was just Megan, Vince’s girl, the bartender. The ruse was his cage. Every crude fantasy Wicks described, Tyler had to absorb in silence. His jaw set. His knuckles whitened on his cards. But he played ball. The hustle required it.

And underneath the anger — through it, fused with it — he was hard. Hard at this poker table listening to a man with rotting teeth talk about making his wife scream. He pressed his thighs together under the table and willed it down and it didn’t go down. His cock was stiff against his jeans, responding to the same words that were making his knuckles white, and the shame sat in his stomach like acid but the shame didn’t soften him. He hated Wicks. He hated himself more. He shifted in his chair and the friction made it worse and he stopped shifting and sat perfectly still and won another hand. Stacked the chips. Didn’t look at Megan.

The touches began with logistics.

Wicks put a hand on her lower back to guide her past his chair when she crossed behind him with a tray of empties. The hand was unnecessary — there was room to pass — and it slid down from the small of her back toward her waistband before she stepped forward and the contact broke. His palm was clammy and warm and the fingers splayed

wide, pressing into the fabric of her tank top, and she could feel the dampness left behind when the contact broke. She didn't mention it.

Two hands later, Dale's hand. She delivered his drink and his hand came up to her hip — not grabbing, just landing, his dark palm settling on the denim of her shorts. No hesitation, no testing — he put it exactly where he wanted it and let it rest, like the hip was already his. The span of his fingers reached from her hipbone to the top of her bare thigh where the shorts ended. The hand stayed. His thumb moved — a slow stroke along the seam, pressing heat into the skin beneath. She could feel each callus. The rough drag of workman's fingers against thin denim, and below the denim, the warmth spreading into muscle.

She glanced at Tyler. He looked up. Their eyes met and the communication had to be invisible to the room — she was asking and he was answering and they weren't supposed to know each other. He gave her a small nod. The nod meant *play ball* and it meant *I see it* and it meant something neither of them could articulate with Dale's hand on her hip. She turned back to the bar.

An hour in, Dale won a hand — the pot sliding toward him across the green felt. He stacked the chips without looking at them. He looked at Megan.

"Come sit." The deep voice. Not a question.

"I'm good standing." She lifted her wine glass. Smiled the bartender smile.

"I won the hand." He leaned back in his chair — the wood creaking under two hundred and fifty pounds — and patted his thigh twice. The sound was flat, deliberate, like calling something over. "Lucky charm. Sit here till I lose one."

"That's not — I'm the bartender." She laughed, but the laugh was too short. She looked at Vince.

Vince shrugged from the head of the table. "It's his money. He wins, he picks the prize."

Dale wasn't looking at anyone else. His heavy-lidded eyes were on her and the patience in them was the patience of a man who has already decided the outcome. "Tell you what," he said. "I win this next hand, you take the pot. But you sit right here." He tapped his thigh again. "Till I lose."

She looked at Tyler. Tyler's jaw was tight. But they'd been winning all night. Dale had won one hand — he'd lose the next. Two minutes. The money was good. The hustle was working.

She crossed the room. Stood beside Dale's chair. Up close the mass of him was something she could feel in her own body — a gravitational distortion, the sheer size of the man reshaping the space around him. The smell rose — cigar smoke, warm cologne, something deeper and animal underneath, dense and male. His thigh was enormous. Thick, solid, wider than the chair arm she'd been perched on.

She sat.

Not on the arm of the chair. On him. Her ass settled onto his thigh and the contact was immediate and total — the hard muscle of his leg beneath her, the heat of him

radiating through her shorts like a furnace, the sheer width of his body behind her. She was small on him. Perched on one thigh like a woman sitting on a bench, except the bench was alive and warm and breathing and the smell of him enveloped her. His hand came to her waist. Settled. His fingers spread across her ribcage — five points of contact, each one burning through the thin cotton of her tank top.

“There,” Dale said. Low. Satisfied.

She sat for one hand. He won it. She sat for another. He won that too. She should get up. She didn’t get up. Tyler was still winning on his side of the table and Dale’s hand was on her waist and his thumb traced slow circles through the fabric of her tank top and she could feel every ridge of every callus. His forearm rested against the side of her breast — the weight of it warm and certain — and she knew it wasn’t accidental and she knew she should move and she didn’t move.

Then she felt it.

Below her. Against the back of her thigh, pressing upward through his pants. His cock—stiffening, swelling—a thick, unmistakable hardness growing beneath her weight, pushing against her through layers of fabric with a size that made her breath stop. He was getting hard. She could feel it — the length of it, the width, growing against the underside of her thigh, hot and rigid and *enormous*. Bigger than anything she’d felt through clothing. Bigger than she’d imagined any man could be. The cock pressed against her and she went perfectly still.

Dale didn’t move. His hand stayed on her waist. His thumb kept its slow circle. The cigar burned between his other fingers. His breathing didn’t change. He was hard beneath her and he didn’t shift, didn’t apologize, didn’t pretend it wasn’t happening. The certainty of it — that he felt no need to acknowledge what she could so obviously feel — made her face burn.

She stared at the poker table. At the cards. At anything. The room was loud with Wicks’s voice and the shuffle of chips and she was sitting on Dale’s lap with his cock stiffening against her thigh and nobody at the table could see it and nobody would stop it and the heat was spreading from the point of contact upward through her stomach into her chest.

Two more hands. She sat through them without breathing properly. Then Dale lost — finally, blessedly — and she stood.

“My charm ran out,” Dale said. The voice was easy. Amused. His heavy-lidded eyes tracked her as she stood, and she could see the slight adjustment he made below the table — open, unbothered, his dark hand settling the bulge in his pants without a trace of shame.

She walked to the bar on legs that felt different. Poured herself a glass of wine — the third — and drank half of it standing.

Wicks won the next hand. He nearly vibrated out of his chair.

“My turn. My turn, right? That’s the rule. Winner gets her.” He was bouncing his leg so hard the table rattled. “Megan. Come on. Same deal.”

She looked at his bony lap. His thin legs jittering. The stained fingers drumming on his thigh. She sat — barely. Perched on the edge of his knee with as little contact as possible, her weight forward, ready to stand at any moment. His hands came up immediately — one on her waist, one on her bare thigh below the hem of her shorts — and his fingers were clammy and twitching and his grip was too tight and she could feel his erection against her hip, small and insistent, and his breath was on her neck, hot and stale with menthol.

“Oh my God,” Wicks said. He was talking to the room, to no one, his voice cracking. “Oh my — she’s on my lap. Dale. Dale, she’s on my lap. I’m going to die.”

“Play the hand, Wicks,” Dale said.

Wicks lost immediately. He played his cards without looking at them — his eyes on Megan’s thigh, on his own hand on her thigh, on the place where her shorts rode up — and folded on a pair of kings.

Megan stood. The relief was physical. She wiped her palms on her shorts and didn’t look at him.

Vince won the hand after that. He leaned back in his chair — the head of the table, the best seat — and gestured with two fingers. “Come on. Rules are rules.”

She hesitated. Vince was different. Vince was the one who’d said *ease up*. Vince was the one who’d given her the signal, the safety net, the illusion of control. She sat on the arm of his chair — not his lap. Her hip against the chair back, her legs crossed at the ankle, her hands in her own space.

Vince didn’t grab. His hand rested on the arm of the chair, an inch from her thigh, not touching. He played his cards. His body was still — no jittering like Wicks, no spreading like Dale. Just the faint smell of his cologne, the greasy musk, and his dark eyes occasionally sliding sideways to her legs before returning to the table.

“Comfortable?” he asked. Mild. Almost polite.

“Fine,” she said.

He lost the hand. She stood. His hand brushed her lower back as she rose — brief, courteous, the kind of touch a man makes helping a woman from a chair. It was nothing. It shouldn’t have unsettled her more than Dale’s groping or Wicks’s clammy grip. But it did. The restraint felt like patience.

She topped off her wine and felt the edges of the evening soften.

Tyler won the next hand.

“Oh, come on.” Wicks slapped the table. “Rules are rules, right? Even pretty boy. Get over there, Megan. Fair is fair.”

She looked at Tyler across the room. He was already looking at her — a quick, careful glance that had to pass as a stranger’s mild interest. The hesitation lasted a beat. She crossed the room and sat on his lap.

The difference was immediate. His thigh was lean and familiar in a way the others hadn’t been — the shape of him, the warmth, the clean smell underneath the evening’s accumulated smoke. She knew this body. She’d slept against this body for eight years.

Even through the performance, through the distance the cover required, the relief of him was physical — the right temperature, the right proportion, the right man after three wrong ones. His hand came to her waist and the touch was careful, measured, the deliberate restraint of a man who wanted to pull her close and couldn't.

"Comfortable?" Tyler asked. The same word Vince had used, but different in his mouth — dry, light, the undertone meant only for her.

"You're the least terrible chair so far," she said. The bartender voice. Playing her part.

Wicks groaned. "She's sitting all the way on him, Dale. All the way. That's more than I got. I got one cheek. One cheek, and he gets the full treatment. That's bullshit."

"Play the hand, Wicks," Dale said. The same low instruction. But his heavy-lidded eyes were on Tyler and Megan and the look had something in it — a dark, private satisfaction, the quiet enjoyment of a man watching a husband hold his own wife on his lap and pretend she was a stranger.

Then she felt it.

He was hard. Stiff against the back of her thigh, straining upward through his jeans with an urgency he couldn't disguise. Her husband — her careful, controlled husband who played every hand with steady fingers and a locked jaw — was rock hard beneath her. She went still. Not the shocked stillness of Dale's lap, where the size and the strangeness had frozen her. This was different. This was recognition. She knew what Tyler's cock felt like. She knew its size, its shape, the specific pressure of it against her body. And it was harder than she'd felt it in months.

She stared at the table. The cards. Tyler's hand on her waist, thumb motionless, holding himself in check while his cock told her everything his face wouldn't.

Why?

The question moved through her before she could stop it. Was he hard because she was on his lap? Because of her, the way he was always hard for her — the morning kitchen, the bedroom, the eight years of wanting that hadn't dulled? Or was it the other thing. The thing she'd felt building in the room all night. Was he hard because he'd spent two hours watching men touch his wife and talk about what they wanted to do to her and describe her tits to each other and he'd sat there and absorbed all of it and his body had answered in the way his face refused to?

She didn't look at him. She couldn't. Looking at him would mean seeing the answer and she wasn't ready for what the answer might be.

Tyler lost the hand. She stood. His hand fell from her waist and the absence of his touch was worse than the absence of anyone else's had been. She walked to the bar and didn't look back.

Wicks, emboldened by beer and the fact that nobody had stopped anything yet, pushed past commentary into dares.

“Stand up,” he said. “Do a spin. Let’s see the whole thing.” He was grinning the grin — too many teeth, the watery eyes bright with something that had passed beyond appreciation into appetite.

Megan looked at him. The request was stupid. It was beneath her. But the logic was quick and familiar: the spin was nothing. A spin meant nothing. She’d done worse for tips in college — twirled for drunk fraternity boys while they hooted from their barstools. This was the hustle. She was the distraction. The faster these men got what they wanted visually, the sloppier they played, the more Tyler won. It was simple.

She stood. Looked at Wicks with the flat expression she gave men who crossed lines — the look that said *I see you and you’re beneath me*. Then she did a spin. Quick, mocking, eye-rolling, her arms out in an exaggerated model pose. The room watched. She stopped. “There. Happy?”

Wicks clapped. Dale didn’t. Dale watched her settle, his dark eyes tracking the way her breasts shifted with the spin, the way the ribbed white tank stretched.

The spin was the warm-up. It meant nothing and everyone knew it.

Then Wicks dealt the next hand. And when the cards were fanned and the bets were placed, he looked at Megan and said: “I want to raise the stakes.”

“You’re already losing,” Megan said. “What stakes do you have left?”

“Not money.” Wicks was grinning, bouncing, the watery eyes locked on the bra straps visible at the neckline of her tank. He’d been tracking them all night — the straps, the line of the underwire beneath the fabric, the way the bra shaped her and constrained her. “If I win this hand — the bra comes off.”

She stared at him.

“Under the top,” he added quickly. “You’re still dressed. Completely dressed. It’s just — one less layer. You can work it off without taking the tank off, I’ve seen girls do it.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You’re still wearing the tank top. Nobody sees anything.” He looked at Dale for support. “Right? She’d still be dressed.”

“You won’t win the hand,” Dale said. Low. Certain. He was looking at Megan, not Wicks. “But if you did. She’d still be dressed.”

“Wicks, you haven’t won a hand all night,” Vince said from the head of the table. His voice was mild — the reasonable one, the mediator. “What are you putting up against it?”

“Three hundred.” Wicks slapped crumpled bills on the felt. “Three hundred to her. Cash. If I lose.”

“And if you win?” Megan’s voice was cool. She was engaged now — the competitive instinct, the bartender who could work a room, the woman who was smarter than all of these men. This was a bet she couldn’t lose. Wicks folded on pairs. Wicks had lost every hand tonight.

“The bra,” Wicks said. “Under the tank. That’s it. That’s all.”

Dale added two hundreds to the pot. Flat. No fanfare. His dark hand placed the bills and withdrew. “Five hundred.”

Five hundred dollars. For an underwire. Under a shirt.

She looked at Tyler. Tyler’s face was tight. His jaw was set. *Last call*. Two words and this was over. The bet was on the table and everyone was waiting. He didn’t say them. His eyes held hers and his mouth was a line and the words stayed where they were.

And Wicks couldn’t win. He hadn’t won all night. The money was free.

The hand played out. She watched the cards. She watched Wicks fidget. She watched Tyler play tight, calculated, the same way he’d played every hand. The flop came and Wicks — for the first time all evening — didn’t fold. The turn came. He bet. The river. He went all in.

Tyler folded. Vince folded. Dale leaned back and let his cards fall face-down.

Wicks turned his hand over. Full house.

The room went quiet. Wicks’s grin split his face in half — all those bad teeth showing — and his watery eyes were on Megan and the victory was the ugliest thing she’d ever seen on a human face.

She stood very still. The bet was on the table. The money was on the table. Five hundred dollars she’d already lost. And the room was watching.

She could say it. Two words. *Last call*. She could look at Vince and say them and this would stop — the escape hatch, the safety net, the phrase that meant *done*. She felt the shape of it in her mouth. But saying it meant — what? That she couldn’t handle a poker game with some old drunks? That she’d blown the hustle over a bra she was wearing under a shirt? Tyler hadn’t said it. Tyler was watching with his jaw set and he hadn’t said it, which meant the hustle was still on, which meant this was part of the play, which meant —

And the money. The creeping thing she wouldn’t name: they needed the money. Every bill on that table was a bill that wasn’t going on the Visa. And it was just a bra. Under a shirt.

She reached behind her back.

The room went still. Wicks stopped bouncing his leg. Dale’s cigar paused halfway to his mouth. Vince was motionless in his chair, his dark eyes fixed on her with the focused attention of a man watching something he’d built begin to operate.

She unhooked the bra. The clasp released and she felt the tension give, the underwire loosening, the sudden absence of structure against her ribs. She reached into the left sleeve of her tank top and found the strap and pulled it down her arm, working the cup free from beneath the fabric. Then the right side. The bra came out in her hand — white, plain, functional, still warm from her body. She dropped it on the poker table, on top of the cash.

“Happy?”

Then the room saw what no bra meant on Megan Calloway.

The breasts held their shape. Heavy, firm, projecting forward with the pronounced conical profile that was their signature—not the soft round droop of gravity but an aggressive, jutting silhouette that pushed against the ribbed white cotton and redefined the tank entirely. The puffy nipples were immediately visible through the thin fabric—the swollen, raised profile that announced itself even at rest, the kind that couldn't hide behind a single layer of anything. The pink was there, faint, just barely discernible through the white. Every contour. Every line. The top that had been bar-appropriate five seconds ago was now something else. She was technically dressed. She was effectively on display.

The room held its breath. The silence that the spin couldn't earn—the silence that no comment or dare or hand on her hip had produced all night—arrived now at maximum voltage. Every man stopped. Dale's cigar was suspended in the air. Wicks's grin had frozen into something slack and open and hungry. Vince, in his chair, hadn't moved. His dark eyes were steady and his mouth was closed and the stillness was the most controlled reaction in the room.

Two seconds of silence. Two seconds where the only sound was the faint hum of the refrigerator from the kitchen and the blood in Megan's ears.

Then Wicks: "Jesus Christ. Jesus *fucking* Christ." His voice cracked. "Those are the most perfect tits I have ever seen in my life. In my entire life. Vince — are you seeing this? The nipples. You can see the whole shape — they're pink. They're fucking pink through the tank. Dale. Dale, look at them."

Dale hadn't spoken. He was looking at her chest and his expression had dropped every pretense it owned—the heavy-lidded eyes wide, the jaw set different, hunger stripped of everything civilized. His hand, below the table, adjusted something in his lap. He didn't hide it. He wanted her to see.

Megan picked up her wine glass. The movement was deliberate — defiant — but when she reached for it, her breasts shifted with the motion and every eye in the room tracked the movement and she felt it. She felt the fabric slide against her bare nipples and the friction was new and present and she could feel every thread. She took a sip and held the glass and looked at the room and her chin was up and her back was straight and the composure was real and also the thinnest thing she'd ever worn.

And then — underneath the defiance, underneath the composure she was holding like a shield — something else. The attention of three strange disgusting men focused entirely on her chest. The heat of it. The weight. Dale's open hunger. Wicks's cracked, trembling narration. The room's silence pressing against her skin like a hand. She felt a flush spread from her chest up her throat and she told herself it was embarrassment and it was embarrassment and it was also something else, something warmer and lower, pooling in her stomach and radiating downward. Her nipples tightened. She felt them stiffen against the ribbed cotton — the puffy mounds contracting, hardening into points that pushed against the fabric with a visibility she couldn't control. The sensation was

involuntary, traitorous, her body responding to the room's attention with a clarity that horrified her.

Wicks saw it. Of course Wicks saw it.

"Oh — oh my God. They just — did you see that? They just got hard. Dale. *Dale*. Look — you can see them getting harder. She's — Megan, are you —" He was leaning forward, his chair tipping, his voice cracking with something between disbelief and worship. "She's turned on. She's actually turned on. The nipples just — look at them *now*."

She wanted to cross her arms. She didn't cross her arms. She held the wine glass and kept her chin level and her jaw tight and the heat between her legs was unmistakable and she was furious at her own body and the fury didn't cool anything down. The men were staring at her chest and her nipples were hard and visible and the evidence was there for everyone in this room to see.

Tyler watched from the table. The bra on the felt. The way the tank changed — everything she had suddenly visible, the nipples he'd looked at a thousand times showing through ribbed cotton for every man in the room. The puffy profile. The pink beneath the white. Three men seeing what he saw every morning.

He should leave. He should stand up, take her arm, walk out. He could feel the impulse building—legs tensing, shoulders squaring—and he crushed it. Sat still. His pulse was hammering between his legs and the territorial fury and the arousal were the same current running through the same wire and he was trying to separate them and failing. *Stop it. Stop*. His jaw ached. His cock strained against his jeans. His face showed nothing.

He won another hand. His hands were steady.

"Dude." Wicks was staring at him from across the table. The grin was gone — replaced by something closer to bewilderment. "*Dude*. Her tits are right there. Through the shirt. I can see her nipples from here and you're stacking chips. What is *wrong* with you?"

Tyler didn't look up. "Good hand."

"Good hand. He says 'good hand.'" Wicks looked at Dale, then back at Tyler. "I'm serious — are you and Vince, like—" He wagged a finger between them. "Together? Is that what this is? Because that's the only explanation I got."

"Jesus, Wicks," Vince said.

Dale's heavy-lidded eyes moved from Megan to Tyler. Settled. Studied. "Man knows how to focus," Dale said. A private amusement sat in his voice — warm, knowing, the kind of joke that only worked if the audience didn't get it. "I respect that."

Tyler met Dale's gaze. Held it. Nodded once — the nod of a man accepting a compliment he didn't realize was a knife.

The final hour of the night ran on a different fuel.

Midnight approached and the game was winding down but the energy in the room had only thickened. The air was dense with smoke and spilled beer and the heat of five bodies in a room that had never been ventilated well. The particular tension of men who had been looking at a Megan Calloway braless for an hour and knew the looking was about to end gave the room a quality it hadn't had at eight o'clock—urgent, compressed, greedy with the last of the evening.

Every movement Megan made was loaded. She reached for a bottle on the bar and the stretch lifted the hem of her top and she felt the cotton drag across her bare skin and knew—could feel it in the sudden silence behind her—that every man in the room had just watched. She bent to collect empties and the fabric fell forward with the weight it held and she heard Wicks's breathing hitch. She walked from the bar to the table and the sway of each step was something she couldn't control, the soft bounce visible in her peripheral vision, and the room tracked her the way a room tracks a flame. She was aware of all of it. The attention on her chest had become a physical pressure—not heat anymore but weight, heavy and constant, pressing against her from every direction at once.

She passed Dale's chair and his hand found her. Not her hip this time — the bare strip of skin between the hem of her tank and the waistband of her shorts. His dark fingers settled on her stomach, just above the denim, and the contact was skin-to-skin and the heat of his palm soaked into her and she sucked in her stomach reflexively and felt his thumb press into the soft flesh beside her navel. His hand was enormous and warm and his skin was rough against hers and the touch had moved past the fabric and she hadn't said anything and the not-saying-anything was becoming its own kind of answer.

Wicks was drunk. His commentary had passed from fantasy into real-time narration. "They're moving," he said, watching her cross to the bar. "Every step. Watch—see how they bounce? Megan. Megan, stop for a second." She didn't stop. "Her nipples got hard again, Dale. Look. The left one—she's cold or she's turned on and either way I'm about to lose my fucking mind." He was three feet from her. The card game was forgotten. There was only Megan's chest and the running inventory of everything he could see through the cotton.

"I could die happy," Wicks said. "I could die right now and I'd be fine." He was looking at her chest. "Megan, I need you to not be offended. If you came home with me right now, I would treat you like a queen. Breakfast in bed. Foot rubs. Whatever you want. That's what I'd do. That's what's on the table."

"Wicks," Megan said. "Didn't you just tell us about how you live in an apartment above a laundromat?"

Dale laughed. A single, deep sound that shook his chest. Wicks looked wounded for a half-second, then cackled. Even Tyler, at the table, allowed a smile—a thin one, mostly jaw—because Megan was still Megan even braless in this room around these disgusting old men.

Dale's commentary, when it came, was sparse and certain. He waited for her to pass close and said, without looking up from his cards: "You're the best-looking woman I've ever seen in my life."

The voice sat in her chest. Deep. Immovable.

Then, lower: "I want to put my mouth on every inch of you. I want to taste what's between your legs. I want to find out how wet you get when a man tells you what he's going to do to you." He looked up from his cards. The heavy-lidded eyes found hers. "And I think you want to find out too."

She turned to the ice cooler and stayed there until her face cooled.

Tyler heard it. All of it. Every word Dale said about what he wanted to do to his wife. Every graphic detail. His hands were steady on his cards. His jaw was locked. The muscles in his forearms stood out like cables.

Wicks leaned across the table. "You hearing this, Tyler? Dale's over here writing poetry about our bartender and you're just — sitting there." He shook his head. "Most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Tits out. And you're playing poker." He said it like he was diagnosing a medical condition. "I genuinely do not understand you."

"Maybe he's smart," Dale said. He was looking at Tyler again — the same warm, knowing look from before, the same private joke. "Man who can sit still while the rest of us lose our minds? That's a dangerous man."

Tyler said nothing. He dealt the next hand.

Vince leaned in. Close—closer than the others got. She could feel his breath on her neck, smell the grease in his hair, the cheap cologne, the deeper animal musk underneath. His mouth was an inch from her ear.

"You've got every man in this room by the balls," he whispered. "You know that? They're done. They can't see their cards. They can't see anything but you."

His lips brushed her ear when he pulled back. She didn't know if it was intentional. The heat where his breath had been stayed on her skin.

She stepped away. Picked up her wine glass. Her hands were steady. Her pulse was not.

There was a moment, late, when their eyes met across the room. Two seconds. He was seeing her braless, nipples visible through ribbed cotton, among men who had spent the last hour describing what they wanted to do to her. She was seeing him seeing her. Something passed between them that neither could have put into words—fury and shame and heat fused into something that scared them both.

She looked away first. Then he did.

Vince called last hand. The room relaxed a degree—the tension shifting from anticipation to something that resembled satisfaction. The proof of concept had worked. The marks had paid. The product had performed.

Vince settled up at the table. Cash—counted out from a roll in his pocket, twenties and fifties fanned across the green felt. Eleven hundred to Tyler. Tips in Megan's

pockets and purse. Tyler folded the bills and put them in his front pocket and the weight against his thigh was solid and satisfying—not as relief but as confirmation. He'd been right. The system worked. He'd read the room, played the cards, and walked away with more money than he'd make in three days of pulling wire. He was the smartest person in this room.

The goodbye was quick. Dale stood, his mass unfolding from the chair, and nodded at Tyler—not warm, not cold, the nod of a man who'd gotten what he came for. He looked at Megan one last time. The sweep went from her shoes to her face, lingering at the chest, and the look said what his words had said all night: *I see you. I see all of you.* “See you next time.” He stated it, flat and certain, like an appointment already on the books. She didn't correct it.

Wicks shook her hand again—clammy, too long, his thumb rubbing her knuckles—and was still talking: “Same time next Friday, right? Vince, tell her same time. I'm serious. I need this on the calendar.”

Vince walked them to the door. His hand found the small of Megan's back as they moved through the living room toward the front—the same spot Tyler's hand found, the same proprietary pressure, and the mimicry was either unconscious habit or precise calculation.

“You guys killed it,” Vince said at the door. “Same time next week if you want.”

They stepped outside. The night air was cool and clean after four hours in Vince's house, and Megan breathed it in through her nose and held it and let it out slowly. The cigarette smoke and cologne and cigar residue and the musk of male bodies was on her clothes, in her hair, on the skin where hands had been. She could smell it on herself and the smell was a record of everywhere she'd been touched.

Tyler could smell it too.

They walked home. Three houses. They walked faster than they'd come.

Walking home. Megan was buzzing.

Flushed, amped, talking fast—the adrenaline of performance mixing with three glasses of wine and the giddy relief of being outside and away and done. The bartender coming off a shift, downloading the night in a breathless monologue that was half debriefing and half exorcism.

“Those guys are disgusting,” she said. “But that was literally the easiest money we've ever made. Dale had his hand on my ass for the entire last hour. And Wicks—did you hear what he said about what he'd do to me? I thought he was going to climb across the table.”

Tyler laughed. It was a real laugh but it was a degree off center, a half-step thinner than his usual. “He couldn't climb across a table. He weighs a hundred and ten pounds.”

“He'd find a way. He'd army-crawl. He'd slide across the felt like a snake.” She was performing the evening, making it funny, making it manageable, turning the night into a story she could tell herself. She did an impression of Wicks's nasal voice

—“*Vince, where’d you find her? Am I dreaming?*”—and it was dead-on and Tyler laughed harder and for a moment it was just them, debriefing, a team that had pulled off a heist.

She made fun of the way Dale said everything in four words. Of Vince’s cologne. Of the bra on the poker table—“That bra cost more than everything in Vince’s kitchen combined.” Tyler added his observations—the way Wicks folded on obvious hands, the look on Dale’s face when the bra came off, the way Vince watched without playing but never stopped watching.

But underneath the banter, both of them were carrying something they hadn’t turned into words yet.

Dale’s hand was still on her hip. Gone, but still there—the exact pressure, the heat, the slow drag of his thumb. She kept walking and kept talking—faster, louder—because the silence would leave room for the other thing. The bra coming off. The room going still. Every man stopping. And the heat that had hit her between her legs when she stood there with her nipples visible through the cotton, the attention pressing against her skin like something physical. She was wet. Still wet, walking home in the cool air, and the wetness was evidence she couldn’t argue with. She talked about Wicks’s apartment and the way Dale barely spoke and Vince’s cologne and didn’t stop talking because stopping meant feeling it.

Tyler’s jaw ached from clenching. His cock was still half-hard — had been for the last hour — and the walk hadn’t fixed it. The bra. The tank falling different. That silence. Every man in the room had stopped breathing and Tyler had been one of them. He’d felt the same hit they felt—the surge low in his gut—and the fury at himself for feeling it hadn’t killed it. Hadn’t even dented it. He wanted to hit Dale. He wanted to be inside Megan. He wanted both at the same time and the wanting was making him sick.

They reached the duplex. The house smelled clean. Their world. She kicked off her shoes at the door and the gesture was so normal, so domestic, that it felt like putting on a costume. He put the cash on the kitchen counter. Eleven hundred dollars in twenties and fifties, green on white formica. They looked at each other across the kitchen.

The looking had a different quality now. Something in it that hadn’t been there this morning.

They didn’t discuss it.

Megan came out of the bathroom. She hadn’t showered. Tyler was on the bed—jeans on, shirt off—and when she appeared in the doorway the look between them lasted one second and decided everything.

She crossed the room and kissed him. Hard, both hands on his jaw, pushing him flat. She tasted like wine and her mouth was hot and the kiss was different from anything in months—less careful, hungrier, tasting like something that needed to be used up before it turned. He could smell the evening on her skin: cigarette smoke woven through her shampoo, the ghost of Dale’s cigar clinging to the fabric at her waist where his hand had

been, something muskier underneath—Vince’s cologne, or the room itself, or the accumulated smell of men’s want soaked into cotton. She smelled like that house. She was kissing him like she needed to replace the taste.

She pulled his jeans open. Took him in her hand—already hard, already aching—and then her mouth was on him.

The sound hit first. Wet, soft, obscene in the silence of their bedroom. The slick pull of her lips around him, the faint clinging sound when she drew back. Then the heat—the tight, soaking heat of her mouth sliding down, her tongue pressing flat against the underside—and his hips jerked and the bed frame creaked.

Tonight was different. The rhythm was faster. Deeper. She took him further than she usually did and a sound escaped her throat—a small moan, muffled, involuntary—that vibrated through his cock and up his spine. Her dark hair fell around his thighs. Her hand gripped his base, slick with spit, and the wet sounds of her mouth working him filled the bedroom. Steady. Rhythmic. Filthy. Each one went straight through him.

Tyler’s head was on the pillow, eyes closed, and the images from the evening were right there — vivid, unavoidable. Dale’s hand on her hip. The nipples pressing through ribbed cotton. The silence when the bra came off. He opened his mouth.

“Every guy in that room wanted you.”

Low. Barely a whisper. The words left him the way a flinch does—involuntary, from somewhere deeper than decision. He heard himself say it and his whole body went cold even as his cock throbbed against her tongue, because he’d said it, the thing he’d been crushing down all night, and now it was in the room and he couldn’t take it back.

Her mouth stopped.

One second. His cock in her mouth, her hands on his thighs, nothing moving. He felt the blood leave his face. He’d crossed a line. Her mouth was frozen on him and he was about to hear—

She moaned. Low and involuntary, the sound muffled by him, and then her mouth resumed. Wetter. Faster. Her lips slid down his shaft further than she’d ever taken him and the sound she made around him was hungry—desperate, greedy, a sound that bypassed everything and went straight to the base of his spine.

She liked it.

The thought hit him like a wall. His wife—his careful, composed, controlled wife—was sucking his cock harder because he’d told her other men wanted her. He could feel the difference in her mouth. The increased suction. The way her hand tightened at his base. The way her breathing through her nose had gone ragged and fast.

He kept going. Couldn’t stop.

“The bra.” His voice was rough, cracking. “When you reached behind your back and unhooked it. The way the tank changed after. I could see your nipples through the cotton — the shape of them, the pink — every man in that room could see them.”

Her rhythm stuttered. A whimper escaped around him—high, involuntary, swallowed by the act—and then she was working him harder, her head moving with an

urgency he hadn't felt from her in years. The wet sounds were louder now. Sloppier. The sounds of a woman who had stopped thinking about technique.

"Wicks couldn't stop staring." Tyler's voice was shaking. His hips had started moving—shallow thrusts into her mouth that matched her rhythm. "Dale's hand on your hip all night. Those big, rough hands on you. He touched you for an hour and you let him—you sat on his lap and let him put his arm around you while I—"

Sensation cut him off. She did something with her tongue—a twist, a press against the underside—and his spine arched and his sentence died and all he could hear was the wet pull of her mouth and their breathing and the creak of the bed.

This is what they'd want to see. The thought surfaced unbidden, horrifying, and he couldn't kill it. *Dale. Wicks. This is what they'd give anything to see—her mouth on a cock, her hair falling around his thighs, the sounds she's making. They'd kill for this.*

He was close. She knew — eight years of reading his body. The tension in his thighs. The way his hips pushed up. She could feel him swelling against her tongue.

She pulled off.

The same way she always did. Her mouth withdrew — seamless, automatic, the boundary that had been in place since before him, since before anyone. No man had ever finished in Megan Calloway's mouth. She pressed her lips together and wiped her chin with the back of her hand and her breathing was ragged and her eyes were dark and she looked up at him from between his thighs with a face he'd never seen on her before — flushed, ruined, hungry for something she hadn't found yet.

He pulled her up. Kissed her — tasted himself on her tongue, tasted wine — and rolled her onto her back. His hands found the waistband of her underwear and pulled them down her legs and off and he slid down the bed, his mouth on her ribs, her stomach, the jut of her hip bone, lower.

His mouth found her and he froze.

He knew her body. Eight years of this body. But he'd never seen her like this — the neat pink slit he knew was swollen, puffy, the lips thickened and parted, flushed a deeper pink than he'd ever seen. Slick. Glistening. Her pussy looked *fucked* and nobody had touched her. Just the room. Just the night. Just the attention of men she should never have been near.

She was drenched. Soaked through. Not the gradual warmth of foreplay — the slick, unmistakable flood of a woman who had been wet for hours, whose arousal had been building since a room full of men watched her strip off her bra and her nipples stiffened under their gaze. He could taste it immediately — salt, musk, the concentrated taste of her need, thicker and more present than any time in their eight years. His tongue pressed flat and she was *dripping*, the wetness coating his chin, his lips, running toward the sheets.

"Jesus," he said against her. The word came out raw. "Megan."

She whimpered. Her hips pushed toward his mouth and her fingers found his hair and gripped. He slid his tongue against her and she gasped — a sharp, high sound, her

thighs clamping around his ears. He knew where to press and how to move and tonight everything he did landed like a livewire. She was responding faster, louder, her hips grinding against his mouth with a desperation that scared him. He licked slow and she moaned. He pressed harder and she bucked. She was so wet he could hear it — the soft, soaked sounds of his mouth on her, of her answering every touch with a readiness that had nothing to do with him and everything to do with what had been building in her all night.

He couldn't stop himself. His mouth against her, his voice rough: "You're this wet from them watching you."

Her hips jerked. A moan tore out of her — not the careful, buried sound she made in this bed, not the bitten-back whimper she hid in the pillow. Something open. Something honest.

He kept going — his tongue, his lips, the slow drag that always undid her — and the words kept coming: "Dale's hand on you all night. Sitting on his lap. His cock getting hard under you and you just — sitting there —"

She was close. He could feel it in her thighs, in the rhythm of her hips, in the way her grip in his hair had gone white-knuckled. And then —

"They wanted me."

Tyler went still. His tongue stopped. His blood stopped.

Megan's voice. Above him. Low and broken and nothing like her — nothing like the prim, composed, carefully-spoken woman who shared this bed. Her voice was stripped raw.

"All of them." Her hips moved against his mouth, chasing the contact he'd stopped. "They couldn't stop looking at me. Dale — when I was on his lap — I could feel how hard he was and he was *so* —"

She cut herself off. A gasp — his tongue moving again, pressing, unable to stay still — and her hips locked and her back arched and she came. Fast. Violent. Her thighs clamped around his head and the sound she made was a whimper that crested into a moan that crested into something she buried in her own forearm, her whole body shaking, her hips grinding against his mouth through wave after wave. She came harder than she'd come in months. In years. She came the way a woman comes when her body has finally outrun her mind.

Tyler stayed. Tasted her through it. His cock was aching, straining, and underneath the arousal something sick and hot sat in his stomach — shame, fury, the devastating knowledge that his wife had just come harder from talking about another man's cock than she'd come from anything he'd done in years. He was furious and he was so hard he could barely see.

He wiped his mouth. Crawled up her body. She was still shaking — small aftershocks, her eyes half-closed, her chest heaving. He pushed inside her and she gasped, arched, her fingers digging into his back. Soaked. He slid in without resistance

and the sound she made was a whimper of relief, of fullness, of a woman who needed to be fucked and was finally getting it.

“Don’t stop,” she said. Two words. Barely audible. The same broken voice that had just told him about Dale’s cock beneath her.

He didn’t stop. He fucked her harder and the bed frame hit the wall and he couldn’t tell anymore where the fury ended and the wanting began and he suspected there was no border — they were the same thing, had always been the same thing, and tonight had just burned away the pretense.

He came inside her with a groan that came from deep in his chest. Collapsed. The ceiling fan turned above them. Their breathing slowed.

Neither mentioned what she’d said. Neither mentioned the words that had left her mouth in the dark — the prim wife, the woman who never talked in bed, who had just whispered about another man’s cock while her husband’s tongue was inside her. The words hung in the dark, dissipating the way smoke does. But the smell would stay.

Afterward, in the dark.

She was on her side, facing the wall. He was on his back, staring at the ceiling fan’s slow rotation.

Megan fell asleep first. Or seemed to. Her breathing evened and she went slack against the mattress and Tyler lay awake beside her and let the night replay.

It came in fragments. Not in order. Dale’s hand on Megan’s hip. The fifty tucked into her back pocket, the flat pat. Wicks’s voice describing what he’d do to her—the specifics, the crude enthusiasm, the running narration that turned her into a woman being consumed by words. The bra on the poker table, white against green felt. The way the tank changed after — the way everything she had was suddenly visible, offered to a room full of men who wanted her. Dale’s hand on her waist. Vince’s whisper, close to her neck, close enough that Tyler could see his mouth moving but couldn’t hear the words. And underneath all of it, the thing that replayed loudest: the words she’d said. His mouth on her. How fast she came. And her voice — the prim wife who never talked in bed, whispering about Dale’s cock against her thigh.

He was hard. Lying next to his sleeping wife, stiff and aching, aroused by the images of other men wanting her. He stared at the ceiling and hated himself and the hating didn’t make him soft. His hand twitched toward himself and he forced it still and ground his teeth and the images kept coming and he let them come because he couldn’t stop them and eventually, long after he should have, he slept.

Saturday morning. The kitchen. Coffee. The normalcy of it felt like a set being rebuilt after a show—the same furniture in the same places but the air different, the light different, something in the room altered at a frequency too low to identify. Neither of them mentioned what she’d said. Megan was quieter than usual. Not distant—just somewhere else, her gaze settling on the middle distance while she held her mug, processing something she hadn’t finished processing.

Tyler watched her over his coffee. He saw the woman who had come hard last night — who had whispered about another man's cock while Tyler's mouth was on her. He saw his wife in one of his old t-shirts, no bra, her hair messy and her face clean and her legs tucked under her on the kitchen chair, and the image was the same image he'd loved for eight years, except now it was backlit by everything that had happened in the dark. He didn't know what to do with what he'd seen. In her. In himself.

His phone buzzed on the counter. He picked it up. Vince.

Guys want to do it again next Friday. Same deal. They loved her.

Tyler read it. His thumb was already typing before his brain caught up.

We're in.

Sent. He stared at the two words on the screen. He should have talked to Megan first. Should have thought about the bra on the table and the silence after and what both had done to him in the dark last night.

He put the phone face-down on the counter. Drank his coffee. Didn't look at it again.

Across the street, three doors down, Vince Barella read the reply. He set his phone on the arm of the folding chair in the garage. Lit a Marlboro. Looked at the Calloways' duplex through the smoke.

The machine worked.

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